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ABSTRACT

The word "authorship," like "ownership" or "professorship," reflects an appropriate and necessary connection between authors and their texts. First used in 1710, the concept of authorship is a relatively recent invention. To understand how constructed the concept is--not commonsensical or inevitable but a compler reflection of contemporary culture--requires a look at the Middle Ages, its reverance for authority, reliance on scriptoria for copies of manuscripts, and the development of such rhetorical arts as manuals for letter writing. There is, however, no full history in English that focuses explicitly on the development of the concept of authorship. The concept emerged as the result of a number of related influences--technical, philosophical, political, sociocultural, legal, economic, and literary. Most important to understanding the concept is recognition that authorship, especially humanistic or literary, has been almost exclusively limited to individuals writing alone. Also, the concept does not apply equally to different kinds of discourse. Tacit acceptance of this concept is reflected not only in the assignments given by composition teachers--with emphasis on individual rather than group invention and concern with plagiarism--but also in methods used for testing and in research. Composition teachers and researchers need to be more aware of the complexity and power of the concept of authorship. (HTH)

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THE CONCEPT OF AUTHORSHIP: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

What do we mean when we say that someone--a nationally known writer or a student in our freshman composition class--is the author of a particular essay? What is at stake when we argue about the authorship of a text, whether an anonymous Jacobean play or a student's research paper, parts of which we suspect may have been plagiarized? Most composition teachers and researchers in the field would have little difficulty answering these questions. An author is one who struggles with and through language to create something new, a text that embodies, however imperfectly, the writer's intentions. (That readers bring their own interests and intentions to an author's text, and thus create their own meanings, most teachers would agree.) And the word authorship, like "ownership" or "professorship," simply reflects an appropriate and necessary connection between authors and their texts.

This is a commonsensical view of authors and authorship, one that certainly has its own validity. When we assign an in-class writing assignment to our students and observe their determined (and sometimes desperate) effort to put pen to paper, when we talk with a colleague about an essay that he or she is writing, when we struggle ourselves to finish a paper in time for a conference deadline, we know in the most concrete ways about the work, difficult and rewarding, to which authorship refers. And yet, perhaps because our own experience of what it means to be an author is so concrete and internalized--so present to us--we may not adequately grasp all that the concept of authorship implies. We

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may not sufficiently recognize, for instance, the fact that authorship is a concept, something quite distinct from the physical act of inscription. More importantly, we may not recognize that our assumptions about the concept of authorship have influenced both the way we teach writing and the methods and goals of much current research on the writing process.

Since one of the benefits of history is that it frees us from our absorption in the present, challenging us to view our assumptions and actions in a broader context, I would like in the limited time I have today to examine the concept of authorship from an historical perspective. One need go no further than the obligatory check of the OED, which cites the first usage of "authorship" as occurring in 1710, to recognize that this concept that seems so obvious and necessary to us is a relatively recent invention. But to understand how "constructed" our concept of authorship is--not commonsensical or inevitable at all but a complex reflection of our culture--we might best look to the middle ages, with its reverance for authority, reliance on scriptoria for copies of manuscripts, and development of such rhetorical arts as the ars dictiminis, manuals for letter writing that, at their most elaborate, provided countless formulae and models for imitation. (The Practica sive usus dictaminis, described by James Murphy in Rhetoric in the Middle Ages as the "final stage in an automatizing tendency which had been an undercurrent in the ars dictaminis from its earliest days" almost succeeded in making "letter-writing a skill...possible to any person capable of copying individual letters of the alphabet"(259). In The Friar as Critic: Literary Attitudes in the Middle Ages, Judson Boyce Allen attempts to help scholars understand what it meant to be an author or reader in this

period. Aware of the difficulty of his task, Allen comments that:

> when we are faced with medieval authors and readers alike, we are faced with a foreign, nonempirical sensibility. We are confronted by authors who are for the most part content to repeat inherited materials, making their own primary contribution...primarily in the area of decoration, and often content to remain anonymous: if they name themselves, it is only in the later Middle Ages that they are not primarily doing so in order to solicit prayer. At the same time we are confronted by readers, or more properly hearers, who already know what the story means, who have probably heard it before, and who, in a sense, are attending the ornamented celebration of a received truth"(p. 59; my emphasis).

Comments like Allen's that focus explicitly on the nature of authorship in a specific historical period are, in my experience, all too infrequent--generally little more than a brief digression in a work devoted to a more traditional literary subject. For despite the fact that there are numerous histories of the development of the book, of printing and copyright laws, there is to my knowledge no full history in English that focuses explicitly on the development of the concept of authorship. Such a history would include, as Michel Foucoult notes in "What Is an Author?," analyses of such issues as "how the author became individualized in a culture like ours, what status he has been given, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution began, in what system of valorization the author was involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than heroes, and how this fundamental category of 'the-man-and-his-work-criticism' began"(p. 141). As Foucoult's comments indicate, our concept of authorship, like most abstractions, is hardly pure; rather, it emerged as the result of a number of related influenced--technical, philosophical,

political, sociocultural, legal, economic, and literary.

Elizabeth Eisenstein, author of The Printing Press As An Agent of Change, has argued, for instance, that "both the eponymous inventor and personal authorship appeared at the same time and as a consequence of the same process," the development of the printing press. Individuals composed for centuries before the printing press, of course, and felt varying senses of ownership over the discourse they created. Otherwise Aristophanes could hardly have complained so violently of plagiarism in The Frogs; and medieval monks, of colleagues who stole a good anecdote before they could use it in a sermon (Eisenstein, p. 121, fn 242). But, according to Eisenstein, it was the printing press which made the development of the concept of authorship as intellectual property rights both inevitable and necessary. "Scribal culture," she argues, "worked against the concept of intellectual property rights. It did not lend itself to preserving traces of personal idiosyncracies, to the public airing of private thoughts, or to any of the forms of silent publicity that have shaped consciousness of self during the past four centuries" (pp. 229-230).

Eisenstein emphasizes that the printing press was only *an*, not *the*, agent of change in the transition from medieval to modern western culture. Economic factors played a strong role in necessitating copyright laws, the ultimate expression of our belief that writers, like any other person who creates something new and unique, literally own their texts. In The Coming of the Book, for instance, Febvre and Martin argue that when studying the history of printing, the book, and authorship "One fact must not be lost sight of: the printer and the bookseller worked above all and from the beginning from profit"(p. 249). Marxists would go on to note,

however, as Raymond Williams does in Marxism and Literature, that our emphasis on "the figure of the individual author, as [that on] the related figure of the individual subject, [is] characteristic of bourgeois thought"(p. 193). One doesn't need to be a Marxist to agree with Williams that our concept of authorship is clearly linked with the development of capitalism in western culture.

Other influences have also helped determine our concept of authorship. The impact of Cartesianism, for instance, of Descartes' insistance that the foundation or starting point for belief can only be found by turning inward, has extended far beyond the specific disciplinary impact of his *cogito ergo sum*. As Terry Eagleton notes in Literary Theory: An Introduction, since the start of the nineteenth century, literary theory has "assumed that, in the main, at the centre of the world is the contemplative individual self, bowed over its books, striving to gain touch with experience, truth, reality, history, or tradition"(p. 196). Although Eagleton comments that this privileging of the individual "reflects the values of a political system which subordinates the sociality of human life to solitary individual enterprise"(p. 197), he might with equal accuracy have related it to our rationalist philosophical tradition. Or, staying within the realm of the literary, he might have cited the impact of Romanticism, with its emphasis on originality and individual inspiration--its claim that writers, and especially poets, have a unique vision of truth and beauty which only they can express, and that the language in which they express this vision is different in crucial ways from ordinary discourse. (That critics have argued that Romanticism "may be thought of as the way a whole generation attempted to shelter itself, as an organism wards off shock, against

[the]...unprecedented transformation of the world into the...materialistic environment of middle-class capitalism"[Jameson, Marxism and Form, p. 94] only adds another twist to the convoluted history of the concept of authorship.)

As this very brief discussion indicates, authorship is, like a number of other key terms in our culture, an overdetermined concept in that it would be possible to trace a number of related histories, all of which point toward the same general constellation of meanings. Perhaps the most important of these for our understanding of authorship involves the recognition that in western culture the concept of authorship, especially literary or humanistic authorship, has been almost exclusively limited to individuals writing alone. Foucoult states the case for this view strongly at the start of "What Is an Author?" when he comments that: "The coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences. Even today, when we reconstruct the history of a concept, literary genre, or school of philosophy, such categories seem relatively weak, secondary, and superimposed scansions in comparison with the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work"(p. 141).

A second major characteristic of the concept of authorship, one also discussed at length by Foucoult, is that authorship (which Foucoult refers to as the "author-function") does not apply equally to different kinds of discoure. Instead, Foucoult argues, authorship is in fact limited to and "characteristic of the modes of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society"(p. 148). This point was vividly pressed home to me during a recent discussion with a colleague who was questioning

me skeptically about how Andrea Lunsford and I manage to coauthor scholarly articles. When I protested that the process was hardly mysterious and that coauthorship is really quite common in the sciences, business, and industry, he responded with a derisive "But that's not real writing!" If Andrea's and my recent survey of 1200 members of six major professional associations is an accurate indication of their beliefs about writing, these professionals don't really care if college English teachers think that their writing isn't somehow "real." They are content if their writing, much of which is collaborative, gets the job done. The consequences of our assumptions about authorship can be more serious, however, as students of the canon are aware. It is no accident, as Foucoult noted earlier, that until very recently most of our criticism has been of the "man-and-his-work" variety. (To discuss the reason why criticism focused on the *man* and his work would require raising a whole series of additional sociocultural influences.) Furthermore, not only have we failed to examine the social contexts of literary production; we have also ignored whole genres and groups of writers, largely because of assumptions realted to the concept of authorship. In The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working Class Literature, for example, Martha Vicinus describes how until recently literary critics were simply unable to take this literature seriously--to view it as real writing worthy of reprinting and analysis--largely because of class-related assumptions about the relationship of writers and texts.

As might be expected, composition teachers and researchers can hardly have remained immune to such pervasive influences as I have reviewed here. Like the literary critics who trained most of us,

we too have accepted as natural or inevitable a concept of authorship that is in fact historically and socially constructed. We too have generally assumed that writing is inherently an individual enterprise. This acceptance is reflected not only in the assignments we give, our emphasis on individual, rather than group, invention, and our near obsessive concern with plagiarism, but in our methods of testing as well. And we have probably been naive about the politics of authorship in our classrooms. While we have earnestly told our students that we want them to experience the pleasure and satisfaction of authorship, for instance, we have often at the same time held up as examples for them essays by professional writers collected in authoritatively bound readers. Despite their inviting titles and engaging covers, such collections of essays--even those that attempt to reflect current thinking on the composing process--may well strike students not as invitations to authorship but as demonstrations of how unattainable, and perhaps even undesirable, authorship is for them. And when we follow intense discussions of professional essays with assignments that require students to fill-in-the-five-paragraph-theme or comparison-contrast-blank, should we really be surprised that students don't see, in Foucoult's terms, any "author-function" in their writing that makes sense to them? Finally, our assumptions about the nature of authorship are also reflected in our research. It is no accident, for instance, that those studying the way writers compose (even coauthors like Flower and Hayes and Bereiter and Scardemalia) have defined their task as that of describing *the* composing process and have (unless they are working with grade school children, where collaboration is accepted) often restricted their research to individuals writing in isolation.

My own research on the concept of authorship has been so limited--and the topic itself is so broad--that I hesitate to force this discussion into premature closure by drawing a neat series of conclusions, much less pedagogical suggestions. It does seem clear, however, that as composition teachers and researchers we need to be more aware of the complexity and power of the concept of authorship. We need to learn more about its history. And we need to learn more about the various ways writing and authorship function in our society. It is startling to realize, for instance, that the medieval ars dictaminis live on today, albeit in diminished form, in the countless books that offer writers One Hundred Letters for Every Occasion.

A number of theorists, such as Foucoult and Barthes, have responded to recent philosophical and literary ferment by proclaiming the death of the author. Barthes, in fact, has an essay by that title. Despite the counter-intuitive nature of these claims--if the author is dead, we might ask Barthes and Foucoult, why do you keep on writing?--they have a number of useful, if consciously provocative, points to make, points having more to do, in literary terms, with the disparagement or dislocation of author in favor of writing or text than with an actual end to textual production. But though we may accept that--to use the trendiest terms--deconstructing the author is our project, as well as that of the literary critic or philosopher, we need to maintain our own perspective and goals. For though the concept of authorship may have limitations, such as an exclusive identification of authorship as an individual activity, a naive equation of author and text, and an alienating emphasis on the product of writing as intellectual property rights, as teachers of composition (and as writers

ourselves) we know that the act of creating meaning through language can empower writers. Rather than proclaiming the death of the author, then, we will continue to struggle to find ways to help our students experience that empowerment. And as we reflect on this struggle, we may also help shape a revitalized concept of authorship.

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